

Book Reviews

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Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (eds.), *J. S. Mill's Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. viii + 392.

This volume begins with an introductory essay by the editors, and there are fourteen chapters by individual contributors. These contributors include Alan Ryan, Dennis Thompson, as well as a number of younger writers of the present generation, who have written recent books on Mill, such as Bruce Baum, Georgios Varouxakis, and Maria Morales. Amongst the contributors, most are either philosophers or political theorists at North American universities, and generally reflect the current preoccupations of those disciplines. The book is divided into three sections, 'Liberty and its Limits', 'Democracy and the Individual', and, less traditional in focus, 'Beyond National Borders'. The first sections dwell chiefly on the themes associated with Mill's *On Liberty* and *Considerations on Representative Government*, while the third more controversially addresses Mill's treatment of foreign policy, colonial and imperial issues.

Movement in the latter direction reflects not only a growing engagement with imperial themes in political theory and the history of political thought in recent years. It also marks a willingness to confront what in the second half of the twentieth century was often regarded as the more unpleasant, hypocritical aspect of Mill's liberalism: the fact that despotic rule over 'barbarian' peoples was justified, as *On Liberty* famously put it, so long as the end in view was their improvement and the means seen in some measure to be effecting that end.

Nonetheless, both by what it addresses and what has been omitted from the conference, and from other recent trends in Mill scholarship, the volume reflects other ongoing controversies about the nature of Mill's contribution to political thought and what relevance it possesses for twenty-first century readers. Two issues which emerged at the conference itself reflect continuing disagreements about these issues, namely, the nature of the 'libertarian' reading of Mill, which takes the maximization of liberty to be both the central theme of Mill's most famous text and the summation of his philosophy as a whole; and the 'utopian' reading of Mill, the validity of which was hotly denied by most of the contributors to a plenary session of the conference. Both of these issues ultimately focus on questions of how Mill's political thought ought to be classified. The Victorian era's most famous liberal termed himself a 'Socialist' in his autobiography, and one essay here, by Bruce Baum, takes up the issue of the meaning of this oft-neglected assertion, while Alan Ryan's contribution plausibly describes Mill's ultimate position as one of 'market

socialism'. (There is no reconstruction here, however, of the equally vexed and related issue of Mill's intellectual relationship to Harriet Taylor Mill, though one essay, by Maria Morales, specifically treats Mill's feminism and *The Subjection of Women*.) Urbinati's own essay takes up the issue of what Mill meant by 'despotism' and what limits were implied on the exercise of such rule. Amongst the essays on foreign issues to touch on similar themes, those by Varouxakis and Karuna Mantena echo similar concerns, while Stephen Holmes and Michael Walzer range more widely in assessing the implications for liberalism's treatment of imperial themes after Mill.

Amongst the more narrowly political essays, those by Zakaras and Jonathan Riley acknowledge the often eccentric, marginal nature of Mill's plea for proportional representation, weighted voting to give greater preponderance to the intellectual elite, and so on. After a fashion, the volume's tripartite emphasis reveals in fact that what was most mainstream about Mill's liberalism was in fact his attitude towards and justification of alien rule over non-European peoples. In those aspects of his own political thought designed to assess and amend domestic British politics, Mill was often out of sympathy with the leading trends of his own time, and his own thought has only been made commensurate with many later forms of liberalism by the defense of cavalierly unhistorical readings of many of his leading texts, notably *On Liberty*. Whatever the superficial alignment of Mill's defense of liberty with that interpretation of western political thought which makes the embracing of liberty the *telos* of its overall development, Mill's own contribution is far more complex than much of the Anglo-American interpretation of the past half-century has often conceded. Mill did not favour unbridled capitalism, unbridled liberty, or unbridled democracy, and the thrust of the Cold War interpretation of many of his central doctrines is to contend that he did. This book functions usefully as a summary of some aspects of this inheritance. But it also indicates just how troublesome some aspects of the Millian inheritance are, notably in the adaptation of Tocqueville's description of the 'tyranny of the majority', in the development of utilitarianism in Mill's hands, and particularly its relation to religion, and in the nature and meaning of Mill's famous 'harm' principle, which constitutes the core argument of *On Liberty*. These essays indicate in particular that in order to maintain that Mill remains a central liberal thinker, a privileging of one interpretation of Mill's principle of liberty, rather than a trumpeting of Mill's conception of democracy, remains the most favoured course of most academic commentators on Mill. As Stephen Holmes amongst other contends here, Mill's antagonism towards majoritarian democracy is difficult to render fashionable, even if Liberal Democrats in Britain have once again raised the spectre of proportional representation in the 2010 electoral campaign. Yet this at least indicates that Mill can be seen to be as controversial a thinker as he was in his own lifetime, often in relation to the same causes, and as well worth returning to for his clarity of treatment of many of the most contested themes of liberalism as ever.

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